Label placement in forms
and other time-consuming forms controversies

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User Experience Lisbon 2010

A bit about me:
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Consultancy:  www.effortmark.co.uk
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Stone, Jarrett, Woodroffe and Minocha (2005)
User interface design and evaluation
Morgan Kaufmann

Jarrett and Gaffney (2008)
Forms that work: Designing web forms for usability
Morgan Kaufmann

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Agenda

Where people look on forms
What that implies for placing labels
Let’s stress about unimportant details
Three details that do affect users
If it looks good, it’s easy to use
Final reminder: it’s what you ask and why that really matters

Reading forms is different from using them
Reading forms is different from using them

Are my observations confirmed by eye-tracking? A look at some heat maps

Examples thanks to permission from Ian Roddis, Head of Online Services, The Open University
Now try it for yourself

- Look at this printout of a forms page
- Circle the places where you think that users looked
- Put a cross on the places where users clicked
Order for myself

We have filled in your address (amend where necessary). Please complete the details below.

Fields marked * must be filled in

Address*

Town/City*  LEIGHTON BUZZARD

County  Beds

Postcode

Title*  (Choose)

Other title

First name*

Last name*

Gender*  (Choose)

OU Personal Identifier (if known)

Date of birth (DD MM YYYY)

Daytime phone number

Evening phone number

Mobile phone number

Email Address

Which of these subject areas are you most interested in studying with the Open University?  (Choose)

Which of these best describes your reason for enquiring about study with the Open University?  (Choose)

When would you like to start studying with the Open University?  (Choose)

How did you find out about us? Please tell us how you found out about our website

If the promotion you saw has a response code please enter it here (e.g. UGCKY2)...  

If you do not have the response code in which publication/website did you see our promotion?  (Choose)
One person's heat map

- Small green dots show narrow focus on labels and left end of fields
- Red crosses show clicks
An aggregate

- Narrow focus on the easy questions at the top
- Gets messy further down: harder questions, more answers to consider

The ‘narrow focus’ means big jumps for the users’ eyes.
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Where to put labels
1. Labels outside boxes
2. Hints inside boxes
3. Labels inside boxes
Mario Penzo’s recommendation: “Place labels above or right-align them”

Penzo, M (2006) Label Placement in Forms

Are all these questions equivalent? Where do the answers come from?

- Your address
- Your city
- Company you work for
- Number of colleagues

- Your address
- Your city
- Company you work for
- n° of colleagues

- Name
- Surname
- Age
- City
Easy questions and hard questions prompt different patterns of reading

- Users glance at populated answers
- Users look mostly at the left end of the answer space for easy questions
- Users read complex instructions quite carefully...
- ... provided they are on the way to their goal

Update:
Labels above the fields may be no faster than right aligned labels

- Das, McEwan and Douglas investigated label placement
- Chose a simple form with simple questions
- Found no difference between labels above the fields and right-aligned labels

Das, McEwan and Douglas (2008)
Using eye-tracking to evaluate label alignment in online forms,
NordCHI ’08: Proceedings of the 5th Nordic conference on Human-computer interaction: building bridges
A section of a form where I think left-aligned labels really are necessary

Users can survive a lot
**Update: Roland Feichtinger finds that labels below the boxes may work better in Austria**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method 1 (more effort, and may not work): Decide where to put your labels according to your users, their goals, and the questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Your users and their goals ...</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willing to reveal the answers; filling in the form helps them to achieve a goal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unwilling to reveal answers or reluctant to fill in the form</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Method 2 (easier, and guaranteed success):
Choose anything harmonious then test and test

- Any reasonably harmonious arrangement of labels and boxes is likely to be OK
- The only guaranteed way of achieving a good form is:
  - Test YOUR form with YOUR users
  - Make changes based on what you find
  - Test again with (different) users
  - Make more changes
  - Repeat until the form works
A variety of plans to fit everyone’s needs. You can upgrade, downgrade, or cancel any time. All pay accounts include a 30-day Free Trial.
Where to put labels

1. Labels outside boxes
2. Hints inside boxes
3. Labels inside boxes

Some terminology: my definitions of label, hint, and default

- **Label:** the text that stands for a question
  - May be just a word: “Phone”
  - May be a fully-formed request: “Please give us a contact phone number”
  - May be a fully-formed question: “What phone number may we call?”

- **Hint:** an extra piece of text that helps to explain the label
  - May be a formatting hint: “(XXX) XXXX - XXXX”
  - May explain what to put in the box: “your usual daytime number”

- **Default:** a value that is already entered for the user
  - May be a standard default that works for many users
  - May be a pre-populated value from data collected elsewhere
It’s not always obvious. Which of these are label, hint, or default?

Users often interpret hints as defaults

- 98% of the scientific users of this form accepted the hint as a default
- 60% of expert users accepted the hint as a default
Do not put hints inside fields on web forms

😊 Moving the hint to one side on click doesn’t work
   – The user doesn’t click into the field because it is a default
😊 Reducing the visual impact of the hint doesn’t work
   – Users don’t understand why the hint is less legible
😊 Putting the hint outside the field should work
   – Provided the user sees the hint when it is needed

Where to put labels

1. Labels outside boxes
2. Hints inside boxes
3. Labels inside boxes
I’m seeing some labels inside the boxes

A B

Which test won – A or B?

http://whichtestwon.com/archives/3442
Don’t put the labels inside the boxes

- No specific evidence for this
- Just seems like a silly idea
- Anyone willing to test it?

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Let’s stress about unimportant details

Colons at the end of labels? Sentence or title case? Required field indicator?

Colons at the ends of labels are a matter of considerable debate

Pick one style. Stick with it. It’s not worth arguing about.

Sentence or title case?
Sentence case wins. (But only just).

- This is sentence case
- This is Title Case
- This Is Capitalisation Of Each Initial Letter
- ISO-9241 part 17 says
  - “Initial upper-case (capital) letter for field labels: To facilitate readability, the text field labels begin with an upper-case letter. The rest of the label should contain lower case (small) letters except for cases where the label is a logo, an acronym or language convention that requires each word in the label to begin with a capital letter.”
- Sentence case is slightly more legible due to familiarity
- It’s not worth changing a big suite of forms to fix this


Required field indicator?
There’s a theme developing here ....

- Miriam Frost Jungwirth:
  - “I was once charged with testing that. Seriously. $10,000 of manhours testing asterisk placement.
    There was no difference in user performance. At all.”
- I’m a little more interested in this discussion:
  - Indicators placed to the right of the field are likely to be invisible
  - Put the text describing the indicator at the top of the fields (that is, not at the end of the form and not in the instructions)
  - Use the same indicator in both places (text and next to required field)
  - Use the alt-text ‘required’ (not ‘asterisk’)
  - Always indicate required; don’t switch to indicating optional
  - If you feel the urge to indicate optional, use the full word ‘optional’
  - Do not use colour on its own as an indicator

Miriam Frost Jungwirth, posting on CHI-WEB, 19 April 2007
An example of required field indicators using colour alone

An example of required field indicators at the wrong end of the field
Which is the most important problem

- Examine the Michigan Department of Transport form
- Find as many usability problems as you can
- Decide which ONE problem is the most important

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1. It’s not OK and I don’t want to Cancel
2. Shorter preambles
3. ‘False ends’

Buttons really do matter to users.
1. Label the button with what it does.
2. If the user doesn't want to do it, don't have a button for it.

- “OK” works – if it makes sense to say “OK” at that point
- “Reset” probably doesn’t work
  
  Reset Button: INPUT TYPE=RESET

  An INPUT element with 'TYPE=RESET' represents an input option, typically a button, that instructs the user agent to reset the form's fields to their initial states. The VALUE attribute, if present, indicates a label for the input (button).

  When you are finished, you may submit this request: <input type=submit>

  You may clear the form and start over at any time: <input type=reset>

http://www.w3.org/MarkUp/html-spec/html-spec_8.html#SEC8.1.2.8

LukeW writes about buttons

http://www.lukew.com/resources/articles/PSactions.asp
LukeW and Etre tested a selection of different button placements and styles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Button Placement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Which one do you prefer? Why? Is there a better option?

Only Option E performed poorly during our testing
Which one do you prefer? Why?
Is there a better option?

“Only Option E performed poorly during our testing”

A new selection of options: get rid of E, add another one?
Method 2 (easier, and guaranteed success): Choose anything sensible then test and test

- Any arrangement of buttons that puts the SUBMIT (action) button where users expect to find it will probably be OK
- Make sure that the SUBMIT button cannot be confused with destructive buttons
- The only guaranteed way of achieving a good form is:
  - Test YOUR form with YOUR users
  - Make changes based on what you find
  - Test again with (different) users
  - Make more changes
  - Repeat until the form works

Three details that do affect users

1. It’s not OK and I don’t want to Cancel
2. Shorter preambles
3. ‘False ends’
A/B testing

Varied:
- photo
- background
- colours
- shading
- buttons
- preamble

In our 2004 study, we found that only a better preamble made any real difference

- We tested a wide selection of visual variants of a form
- Variants improved conversion rates
- The only variation that achieved statistical significance was the improved preamble:
  - Shorter
  - Clearer
  - Better layout

Jason Fried talks about the new signup form.

- “The previous form … was dated and too long… we wanted the redesigned form to be markedly shorter than the one it was replacing”.
- “We spent a lot of time on the language, graphical elements in the sidebar, and overall information flow throughout the process”.

http://37signals.com/svn/posts/1867-design-decisions-new-signup-form

Three details that do affect users

1. It’s not OK and I don’t want to Cancel
2. Shorter preambles
3. ‘False ends’
‘False ends’: if it feels like the end of the conversation, users will stop
Avoid screens in the middle of forms that have no fields for user entries

- Option 1: save a ‘false end’ screen for the true end of the conversation
- Option 2: include a question that guides users around the ‘false end’ screen

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Keep the logo in proportion
Calm your creative impulses
Design to a grid

Some branding reinforces your form’s credibility.
Is this enough?

VisitCornwall Website Questionnaire

We welcome your views on VisitCornwall.co.uk. All individual responses will be treated as strictly confidential, and the results of this survey will be used to help guide our future web site development. Thank you for your help and co-operation.

1. How did you learn about this site?

- Search engine
- Link from another website
- Direct from VisitCornwall (Cornwall Tourist Board) by email or phone for example
- VisitCornwall (Cornwall Tourist Board) brochure or guide
- Other brochure or guide
- News / Magazine feature or listing
- Recommendation from a friend
- Other (please state)

Where is the form?
Too much branding
Another, more recent, look at the Marvel site
Is this just right?  
Or too much?

If it looks good, it’s easy to use  
Keep the logo in proportion  
Calm your creative impulses  
Design to a grid
Calm your creative impulses.

More conventional: still offers opportunities for improvement
If it looks good, it's easy to use

Keep the logo in proportion
Calm your creative impulses
Design to a grid

Design to a grid: work with the graphics in the shape of the page
Keeping to a grid: starts well

Example: chipping at the grid
Design to a grid:
if you give up entirely, it looks a bit inept
A before- and after- example.
First of all, the old one. Plenty of grid problems.

Currently:
tidied up, and with page furniture
**Design to a grid:**
think about the whole page as well as the fields

![Design to a grid](image1)

**Design to a grid:**
has a grid – but also invisible instructions

![Design to a grid](image2)
Now try it for yourself

- Design a solution for ‘invisible instructions’ on the ACT form

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It’s what you ask and why that really matters

- Users rarely abandon forms because of:
  - Label placement
  - Use of colons
  - Required field indicators
  - Sentence or title case

- Users often abandon forms or lie on them because of:
  - Questions that they don’t understand
  - Questions that they have no answer for
  - Intrusive questions that are inappropriate to the task
  - Validations that refuse their preferred or correct answer

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